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Soviets got plenty from Walkers, but not key sub code, Navy says

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WASHINGTON — The Soviet Union was able to break some secret U.S. codes and obtain "very valuable" information about U.S. Navy submarines from the accused Walker family spy ring, top Navy officials said Tuesday.

But Adm. James D. Watkins, chief of naval operations, said "there is no indication" that the Soviets were able to break the code that would enable them to detect the submarines that carry two-thirds of America's strategic warheads.

Navy Secretary John Lehman told reporters that tactics, communications and equipment that must be changed as a result of the alleged spy ring will cost "many millions of dollars."

Meanwhile, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger announced Tuesday that he has ordered all the services to reduce by 10 percent the number of civilian and military personnel who hold security clearances. The cuts, to include defense industry contractors, must be made by Oct. 1, he said. Overall, 4.3 million military, civilians and contractors hold Pentagon security clearances, he said.

Weinberger also named a commission, headed by retired Army Gen. Richard G. Stilwell, to evaluate Pentagon security policies in light of the Walker case. And the Senate Intelligence Committee Tuesday ordered a review of Soviet espionage operations, including the alleged Walker spy ring.

John A. Walker Jr., his son,

Michael Walker, his older brother, Arthur Walker, and his close friend, Jerry Whitworth, have been arrested by the FBI and charged with espionage for purportedly turning over secrets to the Soviets. Michael Walker was serving aboard the aircraft carrier Nimitz at the time of his arrest. The other three had long backgrounds in the Navy, and FBI and Pentagon officials have estimated that the espionage had been conducted for as long as 20 years.

Adm. Watkins called the damage to the Navy "very serious" though "not catastrophic."

Noting that "our security system has left a lot to be desired," Lehman said he would aim to cut security clearances by 50 percent "as soon as feasible." He said he has ordered spot checks of those entering and leaving secure areas and recommended an expansion of a test program of random lie-detector tests for those with top security clearances.

Watkins said the alleged Walker spy ring provided "a very valuable intelligence gain for the Soviet Union," enabling the Soviets to break codes for both voice and teletype communications systems.

Though speaking in general terms at a joint Pentagon news conference, Lehman and Watkins provided the most detailed public account yet of the extent of the compromise of U.S. secrets by the accused Walker spy ring.

The most damage was done in the area of communications, Watkins said, with the "real area of potential giveaway" to the Soviets being knowledge they gained of

U.S. ability to find and target Soviet strategic submarines.

This knowledge enabled the Soviets to focus efforts on making their own submarines more difficult to detect, Watkins said, including building quieter submarines not so easily tracked by American underwater microphones.

The Navy officials noted that the Soviets have shown an "amazing capability" in the past 10 years to close the technology advantage that the United States had enjoyed, and said the espionage may have contributed to it.

The most critical question raised by the arrests last month had been whether the invulnerability of the sea leg of the U.S. strategic land, sea and air triad had been compromised.